

CREDIBILITY AND CITIZENS PARTICIPATION IN ELECTION: AN APPRAISAL OF 2019 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION IN ABIA STATE

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Abstract

Election remains one of the cardinal components of democracy since it is the traditional mechanism by which modern representative democracy operates. The work is an exploratory attempt on how credible elections determine popular participation in an election. The theoretical framework is on citizenship participation theory. The paper adopts qualitative data and documentary approach of data analysis. The findings included that there were low turnout and voters' apathy during the 2019 gubernatorial election in Abia state owing to gory electoral malpractices before and during the election, again lack of credible election has affected level of people participation in governance in the state. We strongly advocate for full implementation of e-election in Nigeria with relevant legal framework to mitigate the effect of these malfeasances in the election and violent political education on the masses to the point of political awareness.

Keywords: Election, credible election, citizens' participation, democracy, political apathy, political awareness.

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Introduction

One of the fundamental problems in Nigeria political dialogue is the fact that interests of the political elites are projected as national issues, election matters not excluded. The political power acquisitions are directed toward personal enrichment and control of means of production and national resources for selfish interest and aggrandizement. . This development constitutes apathy, loss of faith and confidence in political development including electoral process. The corrupt political funding undermines the democratic participation in Nigeria, together with other forms of political malfeasance leads to compromising democratic ideals, the growth of political indifference among voters and mistrust of the authorities, as well as the consolidation of authoritarian tendencies in the state. Interest of the common man on the street, more often than not, does not count in the national burning issues. The democratic experience in Nigeria all through ages is neither representative democracy nor participatory democracy rather minimal elitist democracy based on the selective system by the political grand masters, political entrepreneurs, money- bags and corrupt bureaucrats.

These trends have fostered a situation where the populace seemed to disassociate themselves from governance, especially the election process. Naturally when we say that power belongs to the people, the connotation is that the people are the actual determinant of power sharing, power consolidation as well as wealth creation and distribution through one of its most basic tools called election or election process (Nworie *et al* 2020). However the level of violence and intimidation that characterize electoral processes in Nigeria has caused the people to develop lethargy to political processes in Nigeria. The 2019 election was the seventh election to be held in Nigeria since the inception of the fourth republic. Ordinarily, it was expected that no matter how nascent our democracy is or rather slow the pace at which the process grows, it is supposed to be making a gradual and steady but progressive movement. But this seems not so, going by the perceived outcome of the 2019 general elections (Nnamchi and Nnamani, 2020)

Where did we miss it as a nation? What are the factors responsible for this ugly trend? Is there hope of a remedy? What is the way forward? The paper is an explorative attempt at answering some of the issues raised.

Empirical Review

Chijioke and Okereke, (2020) studied political parties and electoral participation in Okigwe Political Zone of Imo State. The objectives being to determine the extent to which Political Parties discourage electoral participation; perpetrate fear of insecurity; practice internal democracy; and engage in civic education, using the 2019 general election as a study case. Survey research design was adopted for the study. A total sample size of four hundred (400) persons were randomly selected out of eight hundred and eighty one thousand, eight hundred and ninety (881,890) eligible registered voters in Okigwe political Zone. The research instrument for the study was a structured questionnaire for the registered voters titled, (RVSQ) and complemented with interviews. The data collected was analyzed using simple percentages and frequencies. The study was anchored on structural functional theory. It was found that low electoral participation was due to the fact that political parties perpetrated fear of insecurity; did not engage in sufficient practice of internal democracy, as well as civic education. Based on the findings, it was recommended that political parties should desist from acts that perpetrate fear of insecurity during elections; they should practice internal democracy, and intensify civic education in schools, churches, mosques and the society at large, as an urgent remedial action to restore peoples' confidence in the political process.

While Chijioke and Okereke, (2020) focused on party activities, the negative influence of political thugs in the name of party men and its effect on the participation of the citizens in election, this work is focused on the interplay of various activities that impede on free and fair elections in Nigeria and its effect on widespread participation in governance.

Nnamchi and Nnamani (2020) investigated Internal Party Democracy, Electoral Law and Credibility of Elections in Nigeria, Assessing the 2019 General Elections. The Nigerian electoral system has been grappling with a lot of inadequacies since the country's independence. These shortcomings have been purportedly attributed to a lot of factors. The major factor is the selfishness of the ruling elites that has left the country's democratic experiment in a tutelage state. The structure of the Nigerian economy, with the state as the most important source of

economic opportunity is also another factor, the legacy of authoritarian rule and basically lack of solid democratic institutions to a whole lot of other factors. Based on these insinuations, the paper examines the level of internal democratic principles imbibed by political parties and the strength of electoral legal framework in facilitating credible elections in Nigeria with special attention to the 2019 general elections. The structural functional theory as espoused by Gabriel Almond was adopted as the framework of analysis. The theory emphasizes the functional effectiveness and survival of political institutions or systems. Secondary source of data collection, which involves the use of journals, textbooks, periodicals and other relevant materials, was also used for the study. It was established that the Nigerian electoral system is devoid of credible electoral outcomes largely due to weak institutional frameworks such as internal party democracy and robust electoral law. Nevertheless, a review and restructuring of the entire electoral system to entrench a strong institutional and legal framework was recommended.

The work of Nnamchi and Nnamani (2020) has a strong impact on our study. However, they focused- majorly on election credibility with the view to fully x-ray the major challenges to the citizen's participation and its effect on democracy.

Worried by the anomalies on Nigeria's political terrain, Nworie, Ahanonu, Okwudu, and Uzoma, (2020), examine the nexus between political corruption and election outcomes in Nigeria to ascertain the implications of electoral corruption on Nigeria's democracy and political system. They say that democracy is a form of government that promises popular participation, rule of law, impartiality and popular consent; hence, it has increasing recognition and acceptance globally. Essentially, democracy does not work aloof as it is a function of numerous features, one of which is election. Election is one of the finest tools for democratization, which presents a viable platform for periodic, credible and competitive contest and leadership recruitment. However, the centrality of free, fair and incorruptible electioneering processes in determining election outcomes, consolidation or democracy and enjoyment of legitimacy by democratic governments are not contested by scholars. Regrettably, most of the third world democracies and Nigeria in particular violates the key tenets of democracy such as rule of law and credible elections. In other words the recruitment processes, elections and the

subsequent emergence of political leaders in Nigeria undermines democratic ideals. The tout theory of politics anchored the study whereas secondary data and content analytical design were used for the study, respectively. The paper reveals that electoral corruption is a function of a political system, which is a negation of democratic ideals. It therefore recommends effective and efficient corruption fight, effective and efficient regulation of party funding/spending and drastic reduction on the cost of governance.

As helpful and useful this study present, the need to juxtapose the effect of corrupt political practices with consequences on the electorate drove the present study

2.1 Conceptual Framework/ Review of Related Literature

Election

Whereas election is the process of choice agreed upon by a group of people, which enables them to select one or few people out of many to occupy one or a number of authority positions Nnoli (2003 cited in Nworie *et al* 2020). This definition points at elections from the outcome point of view. Since election is seen as a process of choice *agreed upon*. Election summarily, is the procedural process upon which the people or the electorates choose a candidate out of many other candidates to speak for or represent them in a given position, preferably, a political one (Thompson, 2004;Nworie *et al* 2020). Election is also defined as a decision making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold formal office. The above definition showcased the salient attributes of election which include: a) involving a process, b). involving a decision, c). population or the electorate (which is a major ingredient in an election), d). Candidates, e). Office (to which candidate(s) vie into, f). Electoral umpire.

Credible Election

Elections are said to be sound or credible when they produce the will of the people through a transparent, participatory, trustworthy and legal process. Udu, Nkwede and Ezekwe (2015) defined credible election thus: “Elections are said to be credible, when rules, regulations and laws governing the electoral process are followed and ultimately, credible candidate are freely and fairly selected to represent the electorate” However, there is a snag to the above definition,

credible election may not necessarily produce credible candidate. In developing democracies such as in Nigeria where the majority of the electorate are uneducated, gullible and un-informed, their choices may not produce the soundest candidate even though the process may be credible. Abdul (2014) noted four basic principles of credible election which includes: 1. reflecting the will of the people, 2. Participatory, 3. Trustworthy and 4. Fair competition. When the election process follows the basic requirements, it usually reflects the will of the people since the outcome is nothing but the aggregate of the choices of the individual electorate.

Abdul (2014) further assert that Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures The second important criterion of a credible election is that it must be participated by all qualified political parties. The United Nations (UN) in its principles declared that “political contestants (parties, candidates and supporters of positions on referenda) have vested interests in the electoral process through their rights to be elected and to participate directly in government. Building the public's trust in the election process is of the utmost importance to election management bodies around the world. Trust is another salient attribute of election. The credibility of an election largely depends on the actual and perceived integrity of the electoral process. The fourth element of a credible election is fair competition. Candidates, political parties and other vested interests must have a level playing ground to contest in an election. (Abdul, A the Daily Star, Tuesday, 2014).

Citizens' Participation

This entails people's massive involvement in the electoral process of recruitment of political leaders. Governance is a pact or covenant between the governed (people) and the government. Political participation is the involvement of people in politics either individually or collectively (Onyema, 1990 cited in Chijioke & Okereke, 2020). The involvement of people en masse is the validation of power of the public officer. It enhances good governance and democracy. It is also known as Public Participation, which in essence refers to the different mechanisms for the public to express opinions, and ideally, exert influence regarding political, economic, management or other social decisions.

Ezeanya (2012 cited in Chijioke & Okereke, 2020) aver that before widespread political participation can become a reality in any democratic system, there must be certain socio-psychological, economic and political developmental prerequisites, which are assumed to be the basic characteristics of a developed political system.

Chijioke and Okereke (2020) opined that “the degree of participation of the electorates will depend on the extent to which political parties as structures have performed their functions. This will encourage the electorates to take active part in the electoral process, having in mind that their votes will always count. In brief, the efficient and fundamental activities of the parties as political structures coupled with the cooperative support of the electorates through the rule of law and due processes will determine the degree of electoral participation”

Democracy

Democracy denotes a set of ideals, institutions and processes of governance that allows the broad mass of the people to choose their leaders and that guarantees them a broad range of civic rights. (Enemu, 2000:145 cited in Ifegwu & Okere, 2020). Democracy, arguably, is fast becoming a global phenomenon in that it is only a few regimes that share and adhere to ideologies, principles and practices of governance different from that of democracy. This stems from the fact that democracy preaches and centralizes on popular participation, rule of law, impartiality, respect for fundamental human rights, equal participation, freedom of information, periodic and competitive elections in leadership recruitment and equitable representation, transparency and accountability, etc (Nworie *et al* 2020). Beyond the classic definition of democracy by Abraham Lincoln, who stated that democracy is ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’, there are other modern empirical definitions based on the credos of democracy. To this, Morlino (2004, p. 5) opined that the concept of democracy implies ‘a regime has at least universal adult suffrage; recurring, free, competitive and fair elections; more than one political party; and more than one source of information’. Morlino stipulates the existence of democratic institutions and rights in a polity to attenuate its being qualified as a democracy. Democracy has set standards that must be followed if it must be sustained. Citizen’s participation is one of the fundamental doctrine o democracy. Kapstein and Converse (2008), attribute the causes of breakdown of democracy in a country to the prevalence of poverty and inequality that instil segregation in society.

Unfortunately, these factors alienates the people from participating actively in election. Otherwise democracy provides a political platform through elections for the engagement of all members of a community in the process that determines who governs them. Thus, political power belongs to the people and not to the elected leaders. People may easily ‘dethrone’ a leader if he or she does not perform.(Morlino, 2004).

Political Apathy

Political apathy in this context is often referred to as apolitical stratum. These range from People having no interest at all in political matters to low involvement in politics. In developing democracies the electorates often do not bother themselves with even voting.

Political Awareness

This entails being politically conscious. The populace is said to be politically aware when they are conscious of their political rights and obligations as well as stand up for it. Political awareness is said to be the foundation for political participation.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The work is anchored on two theories: Public Participation Theory and Democratic participation theory.

Public Participation Theory

Quick and Bryson (2016) theorized that Public participation in governance involves the direct involvement – or indirect involvement through representatives – of concerned stakeholders in decision-making about policies, plans or programs in which they have an interest. Stakeholders are persons, groups or organizations that may influence or be affected by policy decisions (Freeman 2010) or place a claim on an organization’s or other entity’s attention, resources or outputs (Bryson 2004). Through public participation, stakeholders may interact with government agencies, political leaders, nonprofit organizations and business organizations that create or implement public policies and programs. While participation may be limited to discrete acts

(e.g., a town hall meeting or citizen survey) or described by a set of practices (e.g., convening public hearings or other types of consultation processes), participation more generally is the process of engagement in governance. In democracies, citizens are presumed to be important stakeholders in that they are able to participate either directly or indirectly through elected representatives in the formation, adoption and implementation of the laws and policies that affect them. Public participation thus is a fundamental part of the public–government relationship in democracies (Roberts 2004; Jacobs et al. 2009; Bryson et al. 2013). The context of public participation in governance is broader than this relationship, however. Governance encompasses formal and informal processes of decision-making and management of domains of collective community interest or concern (Kooiman 2003; Bevir 2013). It occurs through broad networks that often include public agencies but are not exclusive to them. The traditional responsibilities, efforts and effects of government are increasingly diffused across constantly changing, networked assemblages of government agencies, nonprofits, businesses and other entities (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Agranoff 2007; Provan and Kenis 2008). As governance has moved beyond government, so too have the scope and need for public participation (Osborne 2010; Bryson et al. 2014; Morgan and Cook 2014).

Democratic Participatory Theory.

The theory was developed by Jean Jacques Rousseau and later promoted by John Stuart Mill and G. D. H Cole and a host of others who argued that political participation is indispensable for the realization of a just society. George Douglas Howard Cole (1959) advocates for the co-operative movement especially the social liberty and political economy. ([www.wikipedia.org/wiki G.D.H Cole](http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.D.H_Cole))

Participatory democracy emphasized on the broad participation of citizens in the direct operation of a political system. By participation in social science, it refers to the different mechanisms for the public to express opinions, and ideally, exert influence regarding political, economic, management or other social decisions. Literally or etymologically, democracy implies that people are in power and that all democracies are participatory. However, participatory democracy is primarily concerned with ensuring that citizens are afforded an opportunity to be involved or engaged in decision making on matters that affect their lives. It also tends to advocate a more involved form of citizens participation and greater political representation than

mere traditional representative democracy. It strives to create opportunities for all members of a population to make meaningful contributions to decision – making, and seeks to broaden the range of people who have access to such opportunities. (www.Britannica.com)

Betty Pruitt and Philip Thomas (2007) viewed that participatory democracy's strengths lie in greater citizen involvement, popular control, and egalitarian and non-exploitative social relations as below:

1. Participatory democracy is its function of greater democratization. Although the extent of how 'democratized' societies should be may rely on socio-cultural and economic contexts, changes that will make our own social and political life more democratic, that will provide opportunities for individuals to participate in decision-making in their everyday lives as well as in the wider political system. It is about democratizing democracy." In such a democratized society, individuals or groups can not only pursue, but also realistically achieve their interests, ultimately "[providing] the means to a more just and rewarding society, not a strategy for preserving the status quo.(Arturo,1992)
- 2 Another advantage of participatory democracy over other democratic models is its educational effect. Greater political participation can in turn lead the public to seek or accomplish higher qualities of participation in terms of efficacy and depth: the more individuals participate the better able they become to do so.
- 3 It precisely counteracts the widely spread lack of faith in citizen capacity, especially in advanced societies with complex organizations. It builds confidence in the feasibility of participatory models even in large-member organizations, which would progressively diminish state intervention as the most crucial mode of political change.

On the other hand, the weaknesses of participatory democracy are: (according to Betty Pruitt and Philip Thomas (2007), its concerns largely rest on the feasibility of effectively managing massive political input into an equally meaningful, responsive output:

- The ideological element of universal participation since any institutional adjustment to employ greater political participation can never exclude a representative element.
- Participatory democracy can be truly operated in any country without having some type of representation to sustain realistically a stable political system

3.1 Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative method with secondary sources of data and documentary approach of data analysis. In effect, we made effective use of publications, journal articles and other relevant materials; they were analyzed content wise in explaining the problem of study.

4.0 Discussion

The Nigerian electoral system has been grappling with many inadequacies since the country's independence. These shortcomings have been purportedly attributed to many factors; for instance, some allege that the political system is faulty because it is built on ethnic foundation (Nnamchi & Nnamani, 2020). There are many purposes for public participation. These may include: fulfilling legal requirements; embodying the ideals of democratic participation and inclusion; advancing social justice; informing the public; enhancing understanding of public problems and exploring and generating potential solutions; and producing policies, plans and projects of higher quality in terms of their content (Bryson et al. 2013 cited in Quick & Bryson, 2016). Ake (1981 cited in Chijioke & Okereke, 2020) points out; however, that while everyone participates in politics, though at varying degrees, what is fundamental in political participation is the extent to which citizens exert influence on the policy direction of the government. The 2019 gubernatorial election result in Abia shows that out of 1,932,892 registered voters, only about 444,376 casted their vote. The implication is that 1,488,516 representing 77.01 percent did not show up for voting. Just about 22.99 percent of eligible registered voters decided on the governor of the state. The table from INEC buttress the points:

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
Okezie Victor Ikpeazu	People's Democratic Party (PDP)	261,127	60.26
Uchechukwu Sampson Ogah	All Progressives Congress (APC)	99,574	22.98
Alex Otti	All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA)	64,366	14.85

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
Hon. (Mrs) Blessing Nwagba	Social Democratic Party (SDP)	2,191	0.51
Okoronkwo Fortunes Paul	Providence People's Congress (PPC)	1,044	0.24
Chukwudi Nnabugwu	People's Party of Nigeria (PPN)	624	0.14
Okey Okoro Udo	Action Democratic Party (ADP)	522	0.12
Igara Ceekay Kalu	Labour Party (LP)	520	0.12
Madu Anthony Chukwuonye	People for Democratic Change (PDC)	442	0.10
Obinna Kelenna	African Democratic Congress (ADC)	333	0.08
Igwo Nnanna Okpan	All Grassroots Alliance (AGA)	293	0.07
Orji Kingsley	Zenith Labour Party (ZLP)	291	0.07
Ulunwa Utokannandu Morgan	Alliance National Party (ANP)	289	0.07
Ubani Vincent Anthony	African Action Congress (AAC)	254	0.06
Onuoha Uko Igwe	All Grand Alliance Party (AGAP)	247	0.06
Opara Alphonsius Obinna	Advanced Congress of Democrats (ACD)	166	0.04
Francis Onugu Ukwu	United Progressive Party (UPP)	151	0.03
Umeh Charles Okezi	Action Peoples Party (APP)	138	0.03
Udeagha Rose Uzoaru	Mega Party of Nigeria (MPN)	124	0.03

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
Benson Chibunna Onyekachi	Kowa Party (KP)	102	0.02
Nkoro Joseph Ngozi	Young Progressive Party (YPP)	100	0.02
Ahaiwe Udochukwu Elvis	Restoration Party of Nigeria (RP)	89	0.02
Awa Ezekiel Anya	People's Trust (PT)	53	0.01
Emeka Uwakolam	Accord (A)	43	0.01
Charles Okechukwu Okereke	Justice Must Prevail Party (JMPP)	40	0.01
Gilbert Chikezie Chris	Independent Democrats (ID)	38	0.01
Chijioke Owanta	Alliance of Social Democrats (ASD)	35	0.01
Annyalewachi Nwaozuru	Green Party of Nigeria (GPN)	33	0.01
Michael Imojo Ndu	Alliance for a United Nigeria (AUN)	29	0.01
Paul Chinedu Emmanuel	Fresh Democratic Party (FRESH)	22	0.01
Chinwuba Queen Edith Asikaralinoun	Change Advocacy Party (CAP)	21	0.00
Obasi Heavens Ugochukwu	Democratic Alternative (DA)	14	0.00
Total		433,315	100.00
Valid votes		433,315	97.51
Invalid/blank votes		11,061	2.49

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
Total votes		444,376	100.00
Registered voters/turnout		1,932,892	22.99
Source: INEC			

The reason for this abysmal outcome is not far-fetched. The activities of touts who call themselves politicians with their clandestine nefarious activities threatens the citizens and cowers them into political apathy. During the 2015 elections, coffins were displayed and dropped at strategic places as part of the activities to cower the people. Describing the Nigerian political terrain, Nworie *et al* (2020: 18-19) opined that: a typical Nigerian politician hinges on actions that could maximize their votes whether inimical to subsequent elections or not. They employ all their antics, including recruiting their cronies tout-tout and corporate touts who are found in motor parks, unemployed/underemployed graduates in suits or in military uniform. They achieve their aim through brigandry actions of touts; they unleash unimaginable mayhem, even to their people. This is because of Nigeria's political culture of "anything goes". Therefore the electoral outcome in Nigeria especially since its fourth republic tends to be shaped by the political bourgeois action which more often use state and non-state actors for electoral gains as the tout way of grabbing political powers so as to be and remain the determiner of who gets what, when and how.

The above, succinctly but vividly explain the outcomes of elections in Nigeria. It also depicts the crude and incredible election culture in Nigeria which forced many of the populace to steer clear from politics and elections inclusive. The government, having been constituted through this means, does not allow for inclusive governance, so the people are not given the chance to participate in governance.

The electoral laws which should have helped to nip incredibility in the bud, are either porous or lack the proper implementation. For example, Nnamchi and Nnamani (2020) noted that the

essence of repealing the electoral Act of 2006 with the electoral Act of 2010 is to ensure credibility of election. They aver thus: “other adjustments to the contents of the repealed Act were designed to prevent frustration associated with litigations arising from the conduct of elections, as well as enforcement of internal democracy in selecting party candidates for election. Essentially, these changes were meant to ensure more credibility and reduce acrimonious intra-party crises often associated with the choice of party’s flag bearers. Aside from this, the Act imposes stiffer punishments for culprits engaged in the buying and selling of voters’ cards”. The question then is has any election been credible in Nigeria after the law amendment? Our discussion so far and other evidence shows that even the 2019 election was not credible.

5.0 Conclusion

Until the people themselves become politically aware, the issue of electoral malpractices will continue to rise with impunity. It is worthy of note that the politicians also use the people as tools to perpetrate electoral fraud and bad governance. Little wonder the political class has refused to carry out violent political education which has the capacity to liberate the people from political apathy and launch them into consciousness.

6.0 Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, we put forth the following suggestions:

1. We strongly advocated for full implementation of e-election in Nigeria with relevant legal framework to mitigate the effect of these malfeasances in the election.
2. Violent political education on the masses to the point of political awareness.
3. Trust is of utmost importance in the electoral process, therefore INEC and other regulatory bodies should rise to the occasion in integrity.

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